

# Research Summary

COOPERATIVE PARK STUDIES UNIT

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## MONITORING 1997 PARK VISITOR REACTIONS TO THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RECREATIONAL FEE DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

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### Monitoring the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

Under Public Law 104-134, Congress authorized the National Park Service (NPS) to implement a three-year Recreational Fee Demonstration Program to increase entrance and other recreation fees within specified park units, beginning in 1997. Individual parks are allowed to keep 80 percent of this increased revenue, with the remaining 20 percent retained by the NPS.

To help monitor and assess visitor reactions to this program, during the summer of 1997 the University of Minnesota Cooperative Park Studies Unit (CPSU) interviewed visitors at 11 units of the National Park System across the United States. The NPS, Department of the Interior, and Congress will use this information to evaluate the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program.

This research summary highlights the key findings from the interviews conducted with visitors to the 11 national park units (Lundgren and Lime 1997). Reports prepared from these findings are available from the NPS National Fee Program, Room 7421, 1849 C Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20240.

### More than 1600 Visitors Contacted in Eleven National Park Units

Between May 30 and August 18, 1997, a sample of visitors to the 11 national park units were interviewed to get their reactions to the new fees. A total of 1,306 respondents either completed the self-administered questionnaire, or took part in focus group discussions. Interviewers also had informal discussions about the new fees with at least 300 other visitors, park staff, and concessionaire personnel.

### Visitors Contacted Were Diverse

Survey respondents and focus group participants came from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and from 24 foreign countries. The almost equal number of female and male respondents represented a wide range of ages. They tended to be above average in income and education. Most visitors were white.

### Most Visitors Were Not Aware of the New Fees Before Coming to the Park

Before coming to the park, more than half the survey respondents and focus group participants were not aware of the NPS Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (figure 1). More than two-thirds did not know what the new fees would be before coming to the park in which they were contacted.

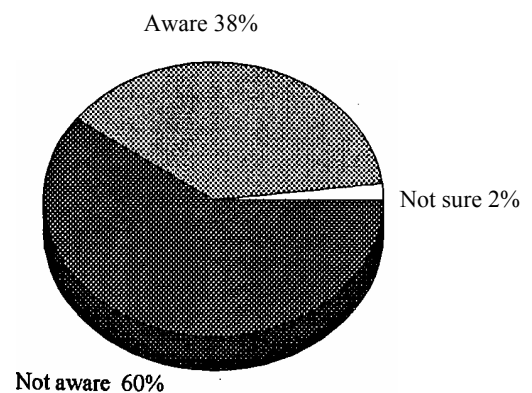


Figure 1. Awareness of the NPS fee program (n = 1,296 respondents).

## By a Wide Margin, Visitors Accept The New Fees

Regardless of which park they were visiting, how they may have gained entrance to the site, or what type of fees they paid, the majority of visitors accepted the new fees. That is, they rated the fees as either about right or too low (figure 2).

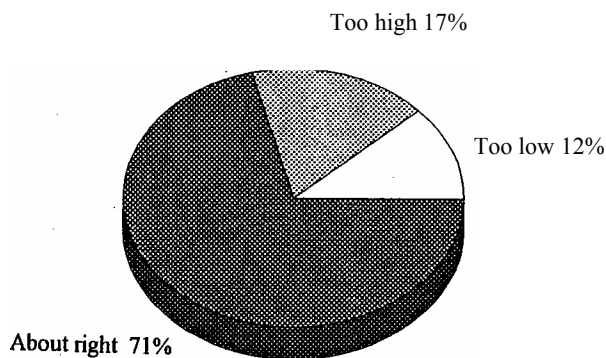


Figure 2. Appropriateness of new fees (n = 1,260 respondents).

However, most visitors qualified this rating with the provision that all the money collected stay in the park, or at least within the NPS. They wanted the fee money used to improve visitor facilities and services and protect resources.

Female, 41, North Carolina:

*If the monies being collected are staying in this park for upkeep of the grounds, its about right.*

Overall, 83 percent of all survey respondents and focus group participants indicated that the fees they paid were either "about right" or "too low."

A majority (71 percent) of the respondents indicated that the fees they paid were about right.

Female, 37, Oregon:

*The entrance fee was reasonable and not prohibitive so a wide range of economic groups can enjoy the privilege of experiencing the park,*

Twelve percent of the respondents indicated the fees were too low.

Female, 43, Massachusetts:

*I think the present fees are ridiculously low!*

However, 17 percent of the respondents indicated that the fees were too high.

Male, 30, District of Columbia:

*There shouldn't be park fees. Americans pay enough taxes!*

The ratings given to the appropriateness of the fees were consistent among survey respondents. This was true regardless of gender, age, education, race or ethnicity, or whether the respondent was from the US or was an international visitor. There were, however, statistically significant differences among income groups. More respondents in lower income groups ranked fees as too high than those in the higher income groups (figure 3).

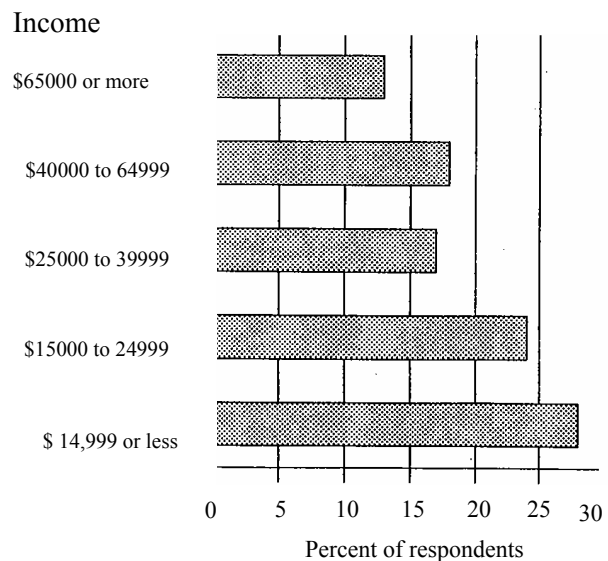
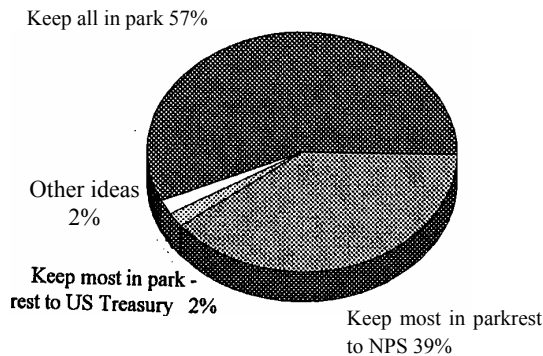


Figure 3. New or increased fees considered "too high" by respondents in each household income group (n = 166, 17% of all respondents).

## Visitors Want the New Fee Money Collected Kept in the Parks

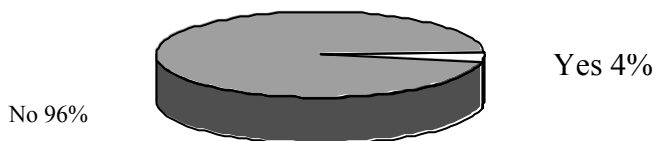
When asked how the entrance and other recreational fees collected by the NPS should be used, 96 percent of the visitor survey respondents preferred either to keep all the recreational fee money collected by the park in the park, or to keep most of it in the park and distribute the rest among other NPS units as needed (figure 4). Two percent preferred to keep most of it in the park and return the rest to the United States Treasury to be used as Congress directs.



**Figure 4.** Visitor preferences for use of the new fees (n = 1,099 respondents).

## The Fees Have Little Effect on Current Visits or Future Plans

When asked how the new fees influenced their current visits or might influence future visits, 96 percent of the survey respondents indicated the new fees had not made them change plans for their stay in the park. Four percent indicated that because of the new fees they would visit the park less often in the future (figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Will the new fees influence future park visits? (n = 1,097 respondents),

## A Final Comment

More than 1,600 participants completed onsite questionnaires or participated in focus group or informal discussions. Participants represented a diverse group of visitors with respect to gender, age, race or ethnicity, education, income, and location of pennanent residence. Despite this diversity, visitor reactions to the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program were similar across the 11 park units. Regardless of the park, the date or time of day of data collection, or the methods used to monitor visitor reactions, the same general patterns of response emerged.

*Park visitors generally indicated strong support for the new fees, provided that all or most of the fees collected remain in the park or with the NPS to improve visitor services or protect resources, and not be returned to the United States Treasury.*

While most supported the concept of asking visitors to pay for the use of special facilities and services, they were opposed to returning fees collected to the United States Treasury, viewing this as one more method of taxation. In fact, many visitors were surprised and/or indignant to learn that in the past, money collected from recreational fees in parks was deposited in the United States Treasury for allocation by Congress and not kept in the park (or at least in the NPS). Many visitors expressed concern that these new fees might lead Congress to reduce appropriations for the National Park System, and did not want this to happen.

Male, 17, California:

*The truth is, I would pay whatever amount to get into the park as long as the money goes back to the park itself.*

Female, 46, Michigan:

*I hope the fees collected by the NPS across the country will not diminish money each park will receive from the Federal budget. The parks should continue to be supported by our tax dollars.*

## Study Methods

This monitoring effort is based on a systematic survey of park visitors from 11 park units (table 1) during a one- to five-day period from late May through August 1997. Both questionnaire and focus group techniques were used to elicit visitor reactions to the new fee program. A self-administered questionnaire was used at 9 of the 11 national park units. At the Jamestown Unit and Yorktown Unit, Colonial National Historical Park, only focus group discussions were conducted. At each park a random sample of visitors was chosen to represent the general visitor population during the study period. If feasible, visitors were contacted during both weekdays and weekends, at different times of the day, and at different locations. Enough visitors were contacted in each national park unit to obtain at least 120 completed questionnaires (with the exception of Grand Teton National Park with approximately 50 visitor contacts). A total of 1,104 individuals completed questionnaires.

Focus group discussions were conducted at five of the park units (Frederick Douglass National Historic Site; Jamestown Unit and Yorktown Unit, Colonial National Historical Park; Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore; and Yellowstone National Park) to encourage an exchange of views among small groups of visitors.

A total of 202 people participated in 26 focus group sessions in the five parks. Where feasible, data from both questionnaires and focus groups were merged to provide a larger data set. Tests were run to determine if there were statistically significant differences among characteristics of visitors.

Although an attempt was made to include representative types of national park units and a cross-section of visitors, the results of this limited monitoring effort were not intended to apply to the entire National Park System. Because visitors were sampled only during a limited period in each park, the sample of visitors does not necessarily represent a cross-section of all visitors to the park over the entire year. For example, the visit to Yellowstone National Park in August 1997 did not provide an opportunity to monitor the reactions of winter visitors to the new snowmobile fees. In some parks, the types of visitors may differ at different times of the year.

Thus, the survey results should not be generalized beyond the monitoring period. Also, the reactions of those who may have decided *not* to visit the parks because of the new or increased recreational fees were not included in this monitoring study.

**Table 1.** Types of fees evaluated at park units included in the 1997 NPS recreational fee monitoring study.

National Park unit included in fee monitoring study	Entrance fees			Other fees
	Vehicle	Individual	Annual pass	
Alcatraz (Golden Gate National Recreation Area)				\$1 recreation use \$3 interpretive* \$10/boat/week & \$4/additional boat or \$25 annual boat permit.* \$20/group & \$4/person/night backcountry permit
Frederick Douglass National Historic Site				
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area	\$5	\$3	\$15	
Grand Canyon National Park	\$20	\$10	\$40	
Grand Teton National Park	\$20	\$10	\$40	
Jamestown' Unit (Colonial National Historical Park)		\$5	\$20	
Muir Woods National Monwment (Golden Gate National Recreation Area)		\$2	\$15	
Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore	\$7		\$15	
Yellowstone National Park	\$20	\$10	\$40	
Yorktown Unit (Colonial National Historical Park)		\$4	\$15	
Yosemite National Park	\$20	\$10	\$40	

\*Fees for Golden Age Passport holders or Golden Access Passport holders are half price.

## Literature Cited

Lundgren, A. L. , and D. W. Lime. 1997. *Overview of a 1997 National Park Service monitoring study to obtain visitor reactions to the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program*. Final report submitted to National Park Service Midwest Region, National Fee Program, and Social Science Program. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, Department of Forest Resources, Cooperative Park Studies Unit.

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